

House, Senate work to reconcile differing state budgets

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Illinois House and Senate budget negotiators have begun a series of closed-door talks to work out a spending compromise that can pass the General Assembly by its scheduled May 31 adjournment date.

So far, at least, House negotiators are adamant that their revenue and spending numbers – the lowest of the three alternatives presented so far – will be the ones used to prepare the next state budget.

“We’re taking the position that the House (budget) is the only complete budget that has passed one chamber,” said Rep. Frank Mautino, D-Spring Valley, the House Democrats’ point person on the budget. “Our position would be we want to operate from those House numbers.”

Both parties in the House determined the state will take in \$33.3 billion next year for its general fund, the part of the budget that pays for most state services and over which lawmakers have the most control.

By making that revenue estimate, however, the House also put limits on what it believes the state can spend next year. The result would be cuts to a wide range of programs, from education and public safety to human services.

The Senate adopted its own estimate of what it expects to be available next year. Using figures from the General Assembly’s fiscal forecasters, the Senate projects the state will collect \$34.3 billion for general revenue spending. While that’s still less than the \$35 billion in spending Gov. Pat Quinn outlined, it doesn’t require cuts as deep as those in the House plan.

Various interest groups whose programs are facing cuts have called for the House to use the more generous Senate numbers. House members aren’t inclined to do so.

“There’s been some talk we need to move that up a bit. We can’t do that,” said Rep. Fred Crespo, D-Hoffman Estates, chairman of the House General Services Appropriations Committee. “We worked so hard in these committees based on that (lower) number, for us to go back and change that now, we lose credibility with our constituents and the Republicans.”

Crespo noted that the House budget bills all passed with bipartisan support, sometimes with overwhelming numbers.

“The political reality is this has to be a budget that we get support from Democrats and Republicans,” he said.

Some interest groups have also called for the House to pass laws that would free up money internally or produce new revenue. A frequently mentioned option is to separate Illinois from a federal business tax break to bring in \$600 million.

“Those things don’t appear to be happening,” said Steve Brown, spokesman for House Speaker Michael Madigan, D-Chicago. “There does not appear to be the votes for a tax increase.”

Still, Senate Democrats believe other options still could produce more money for state programs, said Sen. Donne Trotter, D-Chicago, including gambling expansion and keeping some money now shared with local governments.

“There are several things we can look at, but there are still those who say if we find extra money, that should go for paying our past debt,” Trotter said. “Many of us believe there’s going to be new revenues, but where should they go and how should they be spent.”

Sen. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, chair of the House Human Services Appropriations Committee, said the cuts should be put in perspective. House spending numbers are more conservative than those endorsed by Senate Democrats, but they are less severe than the cuts Senate Republicans believe should be made.

“We’re right in the middle,” Feigenholtz said. “At the end of the day, it’s about passing a budget. The question is what is going to pass in the Senate.”

Although the House is sticking with its revenue estimate, the budget plan probably will undergo revisions in spending for specific programs.

“Are there numbers everyone agrees were cut too deep or could be cut more?” Mautino said. “There’s not a lot of positives in a budget like this. We have more needs than available dollars. There have to be cuts. All groups have to reconcile themselves to that.”

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House vs. Senate budgets

(General fund spending after deductions for required expenses, such as bond payments and pensions)

Category	Senate Amount	House Amount
Education	\$9.071 billion	\$9.007 billion
Economic development	\$113.9 million	\$103.1 million
Public safety	\$1.497 billion	\$1.475 billion
Human services	\$14.385 billion	\$13.5 billion
Other government services	\$1.154 billion	\$1.132 billion

Source: Illinois Senate Democrats’ analysis